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# Defectors: The 'Tempest Tossed'

Whatever you believe about the states of mind of Vitaly Yurchenko (a tragic middle-aged Romeo spurned by his Juliet? a KGB plant?) or Miroslav Medvid (a clear-headed victim of INS bungling? a mixed-up sailor who liked to swim in the Mississippi?), their cases illustrate one point very well: as a nation we ought to be able to do a better job of handling defectors. Most of us agree with the president: "It's awfully easy . . . to be perplexed by anyone that could live in the United States and would prefer to live in Russia."

Yet whatever happened in these two cases, some defectors do return voluntarily—for example, Svetlana Alliluyeva, Stalin's daughter, Oleg Bitov, three young Soviet soldiers from Afghanistan and several others, less publicized, in the past year. And anyone familiar with the lives of recent defectors and émigrés knows that unhappiness merging into severe depression, loneliness, doubts and frustration are common to almost all who come here alone from the Soviet Union and other bloc countries.

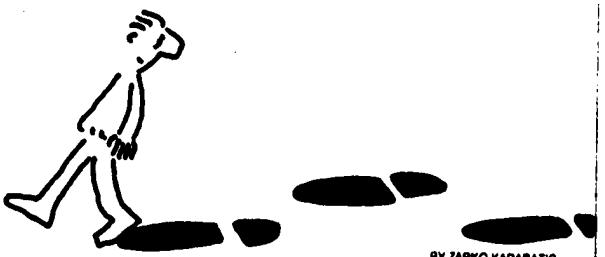
Almost all defectors from communist countries are strongly taken aback by both the opportunities and the risks of our free-enterprise system. Consumer credit and job interviews, for example, are unfamilar concepts to those from communist countries. Many quickly find themselves in debt, jobless or in other economic tangles. Very few of the professionals are able to make a living in their, or any, profession. Academics become shoe salesmen; journalists sweep floors.

Arrangements for dealing with many aspects of the lives of defectors and political émigrés either don't exist or are oriented toward milking them of valuable information and then turning them into anonymous faces. As one defector, Yelena Mitrokhin, said recently, she attempted to contact Yurchenko while he was being questioned because she thought that he would be depressed over a lack of opportunity to speak Russian and an inability to share his feelings with another person from Russia. She herself, holding a doctorate in social sciences, was once steered by the CIA to secretarial school.

Her case is not unusual. Vladimir Sakharov, who defected from his diplomatic post in the Middle East, holds a doctorate from Moscow's Institute of International Relations. The CIA, doubtless operating on a presumption that even defecting Soviet citizens have a strong affinity for the color of their revolution, pointed him toward hotel management school in Hollywood's red-light district.

Most Americans, inside or outside the government, have a hard time understanding the moods of defectors and political émigrés. In addition to the problems of language and the uprooting from home and family, Russian (and to some extent other Eastern European) defectors and émigrés come from a society in which the border between family and friends and the rest of the world is drawn very differently from the way it is drawn by average Americans.

One recent political émigré, a young Russian physicist, released after spending seven years in the Gulag because he had attempted to defect, talks about the different zones of "light and darkness" in American and Soviet societies. In the Soviet Union, he says, one is normally quite close to and frank with immediate family and a very few friends



BY ZARKO KARABATIC

(the small zone of light); most of the rest of the world is regarded as quite hostile (the very large zone of darkness). In the United States, in his view, the majority of us approach the rest of our society and the outside world in general as if it were, more or less, a large zone of light.

When a new defector or political émigré is thrown into our society without the sort of support that a few close friends and family gave him in other trying times, he feels alone and abandoned in what he must perceive as a fascinating and vibrant, but still hostile and confusing world of darkness.

Moreover, even setting aside intelligence information, defectors from the *nomenklatura*—the Soviet elite—are an extraordinary potential source of understanding for us about the way this privileged, insulated and important group thinks and behaves. Not every word spoken by a defector can be considered gospel, of course. For some, their understandable fear and fury can distort perspective, and we must be prepared for some defectors to be other than what they seem. But these are the risks of doing a hard and necessary job much better than we do now.

One of the very few places in the United States where defectors are understood and dealt with effectively is a row house in northwest Washington. The Jamestown Foundation (named after the new home of some earlier immigrants) works to ease the transition of Soviet bloc defectors into American life with advice, language training, job searches, introductions to potential American colleagues and by building friendships with individual Americans. The foundation has discovered bright and talented defectors living in slums in New York, snarled in business and personal debts, highly frustrated at their inability to find academic appointments, and having difficulty writing and publishing their work because of language problems. The foundation helps such people learn to cope in a multitude of ways.

Somehow this sort of sensitivity and common sense needs to be injected into the government's overall method of dealing with defectors without the accompanying straitjacket of statutes, regulations, rigid bureaucratic policies and the annual appropriations hassle.

On the base of a refurbished Statue of Liberty, Emma Lazarus' words will still offer "Send these the homeless, tempest tossed to me." We could do with a bit of refurbishment of our national policies as well, so that when the tempest tossed get here, we do more than shrug.

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